

Vice-Chancellor's Scholarship Awards Address  
Prof Sibongile Muthwa  
22 March 2018

**Introduction and salutations**

- Members of NMU Council herein present,
- the Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Professor Andrew Leitch our DVC of Research and Engagement, Professor Cheryl Foxcroft, our acting DVC of Teaching and Learning; Mr Lebogang Hashatse, our acting DVC for Institutional Support,
- Executive Deans of Faculty,
- The Dean of Students
- Campus Principals and Executive Management Colleagues,
- Professoriate and all our academic colleagues, as well as professional support staff
- Distinguished and other guests;
- Esteemed VC scholars for 2018;
- Family and friends;

**I greet you this evening.**

It is my sincere pleasure to address you at this very important occasion for our VC scholars of 2018 in particular, and of our University community in general.

At Nelson Mandela University we pride ourselves on our Vision to be a *dynamic African university, recognised for its leadership in generating cutting-edge knowledge for a sustainable future*, and our Mission to offer a *diverse range of life-changing educational experiences for a better world*.

We also strive to live by our values of Diversity, Excellence, Ubuntu, Social justice and Equality, Integrity, and Environmental stewardship

While we regard all our values as equally important and critical, and expect all our students and staff to uphold these, tonight we are here to celebrate and foreground the value of excellence. Excellence is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary as the quality of being outstanding or extremely good. Synonyms of excellence include words such as distinction, quality, superiority, brilliance, greatness, pre-eminence, supremacy, peerlessness, transcendence, value, worth.

Our recipients this evening have more than demonstrated that they are deserving of all the qualities that are described as reflective of excellence.

But added to this we have to appreciate that in order to be excellent you have to demonstrate other qualities too, without which excellence cannot be attained. It is going to be important, especially in the University environment to be resilient and consistent in the way you approach your life and work.

**VC Scholars Holistic Development and Support Programme**

A key principle of the life-changing educational experience that we provide at Mandela is to avail high levels of support for our scholars. As a University we have **high expectations** that you will perform well academically, develop yourself holistically, in and out of class, develop

the skills to be employable and economically productive, and be socially responsible citizens who will continuously strive to change the world

Despite the fact that you performed very well at school, you are probably already discovering that transitioning to university is not as easy as you thought. So, to help you live up to our expectations, your family's expectations, and your own high expectations, we provide a **supportive environment** for you.

To do this we provide each scholar with access to a mentor that you can connect with on an ongoing basis, seek guidance, share frustrations, and who can assist you to plan and implement a personal development programme. We also provide you with opportunities to participate in workshops aimed at enhancing your personal and academic development and with co-curricular learning opportunities, some of which have a strong community engagement focus.

Through the support and development experiences provided, VC scholars will discover who they are and the change agents they want to become. VC Scholar Chris Abraham summed this up as follows – "I thought I knew my purpose of coming to university. It was to secure a decent living for myself and those I love – a noble cause – but I've come to realise that it's more than that. It's to learn with genuine curiosity and enthusiasm, while developing yourself holistically". And as a Mandela graduate he wants to "create new inventions that can uplift underprivileged countries", while VC scholar Mutakusi wants to "provide clear drinking water to the poorest areas".

I am keenly interested to hear from all of you during the course of the year what it is you will be doing to develop yourselves and apply your knowledge, ideas and innovations to change the world.

### **Higher Education Context and Student Success**

You are entering university at a time when higher education in the country is emerging from major changes, which have seen students actively leading campaigns for social and education justice for students and also for workers at universities. Students around the globe have historically boldly spoken out and pushed for social change to bring about a more humane and just world, fighting for what is right. Going back in history will be the stories of American students protesting against the Vietnam War; Chinese students leading marches on Tiananmen Square, to name a few. The recent student protests in our country need to be seen in this wider socio-political context, rather than as acts of defiance and a lack of commitment to academic obligations.

In recent years, as you would have observed, the higher education sector has been the site of robust campaigning for change, led vociferously by students across the country. The protests sparked debates nationally and triggered research into better understanding students such as yourselves who are entering universities. Specifically the Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE – facilitated by Universities South Africa (USAf)) was carried out amongst students entering their first year of study at about a third of our public universities around the country. Emerging findings are showing that:

- Most students are first-generation
- Students are getting older
- Choice of university and study may not be guided by formal information
- Students have high aspirations and expectations
- Students are committed to working harder
- Students come to university with some academic and critical thinking skills

These characteristics may describe some of you, whilst also sketching the profile of fellow students you are by now meeting in the classrooms, laboratories, in residences, in clubs and societies; and on the sports fields.

The findings also show that first-year students – like most first-year student populations around the world – have positive attitudes towards their studies and are optimistic about their potential to succeed; they have high aspirations and demonstrate an intention to work hard. I have no doubt that this is entirely true of all of our VCs scholars of 2018.

We know from research carried out across the world that two of the best predictors of student success are *academic preparation* and *motivation*. All of you as recipients of the VC Scholarship have clearly displayed both of these as reflected in your excellent success with your matric results. Well done.

We also know though, that in South Africa, where levels of academic preparation vary widely and in most cases are directly related to socio-economic realities, selecting students for university purely on the basis of academic preparedness is impossible and, in fact, undesirable. Usefully, the research explored other factors which, despite under-preparedness, contribute to student success. Significantly and most encouragingly, the extent to which students *engage in effective educational behaviours within their academic programmes and environment* is also a significant predictor of success. I want to encourage you, as you transition from the high school environment to the university environment, that you not only continue your excellent academic preparation and your effective educational behaviours, but also share these practices and ways of working with other students in your classes and motivate them to perform well academically.

What we need to do collectively, together with yourselves as students, is to be asking: are we making optimal use of the attitudes, aspirations, academics skills and resilience our students enter university with. How can we build on these and integrate these into our strategies to support students to succeed academically, experience personal growth and graduate as a well-rounded, socially conscious members of the community.

### **Importance and privilege of our name**

As the University community we are fully aware of the privilege and responsibility of carrying the name of one of the world's greatest leaders in modern times. It is a name that is known and respected throughout the world. This is why we would like to encourage you all to proudly refer to the university by its full name, Nelson Mandela University, rather than using the abbreviation 'NMU'. This claims and affirms the stature of our university.

The honour of bearing this name comes with huge responsibility. Nelson Mandela remains a commanding, and unparalleled leader of the last century. He dedicated all his life to creating a more equal and just society and ensuring a better life for all. He was a man of integrity; he was humble, caring and always stood for what was right; he believed in fairness; he was a nation builder and a servant leader. He had deep compassion for humanity, particularly for the marginalised, and as we all know, he made huge personal sacrifices in his relentless quest for a better world.

And, of course, he placed huge importance on education as a force for good.

So, it is expected of all of us – staff and students of Nelson Mandela University - to live his legacy. This is no mean task. We need to do this consciously and actively, on a daily basis, in all that we do.

## **In Conclusion**

We thank you for entrusting your dreams with us. I urge you to take advantage of all that is on offer at Nelson Mandela University. Study hard. Strike a good balance between academic work and social life. Above all, strive to live up to the values of the University and the essence of Nelson Mandela.

Live up to his challenge of being responsible and innovative, thinking of the needs of others and placing these at the centre. Continuously grow and adapt in the pursuit of knowledge towards a better life for all. Emulate his moral values and replicate his servant leadership, his deep concern for others and his relentless fight for social justice.

If you do this - as I am sure you all will - you will be worthy ambassadors of the University which proudly bears his name. But most of all you will leave here at the end of your studies as a well-rounded human being with a solid educational foundation, able to actively make a contribution to change the world.

Once again congratulations on your achievement. You are worthy recipients of this scholarship. I wish to offer special thanks and appreciation to your families, your teachers and your communities who have supported you in your academic success journey up until this point. The road is still long and that support and encouragement is still key to underpin and lead to even greater levels of success.

I thank you. Enkosi